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Elkridge residents organize to fight cargo transfer facility

Plan for project could derail plan for new Hanover school

By [Larry Carson](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Elkridge residents are organizing an aggressive campaign to remove their area from consideration for a proposed rail container transfer facility that has also thrown a monkey wrench into Howard County's plans for a new elementary school nearby.

"We want to see if our elected officials can get this site taken off the list today," said Howard Johnson, president of the Greater Elkridge Community Association.

Residents working under his group's umbrella have created a Facebook page on the issue and written a nine-page letter to elected officials detailing their opposition. They are also planning to appear at three state-sponsored community information later this month.

The state and CSX need a place to transfer cargo containers removed from ships at the Dundalk Marine Terminal from trucks to trains. The containers can't be double-stacked on rail cars at the port because Baltimore's antiquated Howard Street train tunnel is too small.

State transportation officials have identified three other sites south of the tunnel for consideration, including one in Jessup next to a state prison on the Anne Arundel County side of the main Camden line railroad tracks and another north of Montevideo Road in Howard County. The fourth location is in Beltsville in Prince George's County. The state needs a rectangular 70-acre parcel for the project, which is expected to cost \$150 million and be split by the state and CSX.

Jack Cahalan, a spokesman for the Maryland Department of Transportation, said the state "welcomes the full participation of the Elkridge community," but said the federal National Environmental Policy Act evaluation will go forward at all four sites. "Hearing from the community is all part of the open and transparent process," he said, adding that the department "applauds and appreciates" the feedback. A CSX spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.

Area residents argue that the site, at Race and Hanover roads, is the only one of the four surrounded by a substantial residential community. The all-day, all-night movement of heavy metal containers by large cranes would create constant noise and congestion, they said.

They also believe the nine- to 12-month federally mandated selection process will likely kill plans to relieve classroom crowding in Elkridge with a new Howard County elementary school near Hanover, delaying relief for at least one year. School board members are reluctant to use the site because of the heavy, constant truck traffic the facility would create.

"They picked the worst possible location," said Sen. Edward J. Kasemeyer, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Budget and Tax Committee who also represents Elkridge. He said he's spoken to Gov. Martin O'Malley about the issue, but because CSX is a private firm, "it's hard to get at [one] individual who can make a decision."

County Councilwoman Courtney Watson, who represents Elkridge, also opposes the location.

"There are 365 homes within a quarter-mile of this site compared to 21 near Montevideo Road and zero near Jessup," she said Wednesday during a morning meeting between the school board and the County Council.

"Why are we talking about the Hanover site?" she asked. "It's not politically compatible" because of the strong community opposition.

Residents also cite worries about diesel air pollution and possible risks from accidents. They complain that state officials sprang the Hanover location on them virtually the day the school board was to vote on the site nearby. The board then delayed a decision, but the panel is running out of time.

Terry Alban, the school system's chief operating officer, said a new school could not open by August 2013 as planned if the county can't use the free 20-acre site offered by a developer at the Oxford Square project. It would take too long to get state approval for another site, he said.

School board member Ellen Flynn Giles said two other CSX sites in Anne Arundel and Howard counties would affect other possible school sites in the area, and complicate decisions for a middle school and another elementary the board will soon need in the U.S. 1 corridor.

Opposition from residents has hardened and grown since a tense community meeting March 24 with state officials in Elkridge.

"I don't want this damn thing in my backyard," said Robyn Winder, who lives on Skipton Drive in Hanover, the first street west of the railroad tracks. Winder is helping to lead a group organized under Elkridge community association, whose members gave state transportation officials an earful at the March 24 session. "Now is the time to end this — before it goes any further," Winder wrote in her letter.

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